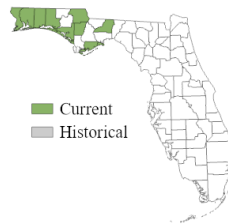


SOUTHEASTERN CROWNED SNAKE

Tantilla coronata

Order: Squamata
Family: Colubridae
FNAI Ranks: G5/S2S3
U.S. Status: none
FL Status: none



Description: This tiny (adults usually 8–10 in./20–25 cm total length, maximum 13 in./33 cm), slender, light brown to rusty colored snake has a pale (white to pinkish or yellow) belly and a dark brown to black head and neck separated by a light band no more than 3 scales wide. There is commonly a small pale blotch behind each eye. Dorsal scales are smooth (no keels), and the anal scale is divided (Powell et al. 2016, Krysko et al. 2019).

Similar Species: Subtle differences in color pattern and head morphology distinguish this species from the closely related Florida crowned snake, *Tantilla relicta*. The current concept is that the two have non-overlapping ranges in Florida, separated at Jefferson County. The smooth earthsnake (*Virginia valeriae*) and rough earthsnake (*Haldea striatula*) resemble crowned snakes but lack the dark head and neck and may be slightly heavier in build; some individuals are gray rather than brown. Dekay's brown snake (*Storeria dekayi*) has keeled scales and small spots on its back. The red-bellied snake (*S. occipitomaculata*) may have a rusty brown (or gray) dorsum and a dark head followed by light spots or a band, but these do not separate it from a dark neck, the dorsal scales are keeled, and the belly varies from yellow or pink to almost red. The pine woods snake (*Rhadinaea flavilata*) is reddish to yellowish brown with a yellowish belly, a darker brown stripe running through the eye, and a proportionately long tail (30% of length). Ringneck snakes (*Diadophis punctatus*) have dark gray to black backs, a yellow neck ring, and a yellow to orange belly with a row of semilunar spots down the middle. General references (e.g., Ashton and Ashton 1988, Tennant 1997, Powell et al. 2016, Krysko et al. 2019) are useful to compare all of these diminutive snake species.

Habitat: *T. coronata* chiefly occurs in upland habitats with sandy soils. These include sandhill and upland pine, xeric flatwoods, and the coastal scrub, strand, and

dune ecosystem. Secondary habitats can include hardwood hammocks and margins of wetlands. Like most small fossorial snakes, individuals find refuge under logs and in soil and leaf litter.

Seasonal Occurrence: The species occurs year-round in appropriate habitats, although it is less active in winter, when it retreats below ground. Oviposition occurs in May–July, with hatching likely about 2 months later.

Florida Distribution: In Florida, the traditional concept is that *T. coronata* is a snake of the Panhandle, where it ranges east to Leon County. Most observations have been in the western Panhandle, especially in the vicinities of Eglin Air Force Base and Blackwater River State Forest (Krysko et al. 2019). However, a preliminary genetic study suggests that the species' range may extend further eastward, extending southward from Georgia along Trail Ridge to Clay County (K. M. Enge, pers. com. to D. Jackson, 6 Aug 2021). The accompanying map reflects the traditional concept; some blank counties may support the species but lack verified specimens.

Range-wide Distribution: This is principally a species of the southeastern U.S., with much of the range spanning Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and the Florida Panhandle. Apparently disjunct populations extend northward to Kentucky, southern Indiana, and Virginia (Powell et al. 2016, Krysko et al. 2019).

Conservation Status: Though not necessarily common, *T. coronata* should remain secure in Florida as long as existing conservation lands are managed to retain natural habitats. Eglin Air Force Base and Blackwater River State Forest in particular provide abundant habitat, although observations have been made at other sites including Apalachee Wildlife Management Area and Topsail Hill Preserve State Park.

Protection and Management: Remaining privately owned, undeveloped upland habitat, especially larger tracts, in Panhandle Florida should be protected as conservation land. Although this species tolerates some disturbance, conversion of natural habitats to high-intensity silviculture, agriculture, and residential and urban uses undoubtedly has negative impacts on populations. Conservation lands should be managed to retain groundcover and cover objects (including following timber harvests) for refuge by small fossorial snakes. While fire is a natural

Southeastern Crowned Snake

Tantilla coronata

management tool in xeric upland communities to prevent succession to more mesic and hardwood-dominated communities, high-intensity fires may at least temporarily impact such species, so burning in a patchwork manner may be preferable. Efforts to control fire ants, which are known to prey on small, fossorial reptiles and their eggs, may be beneficial.

References: Ashton and Ashton 1988, Krysko et al. 2019, Mount 1975, Powell et al. 2016, Telford 1982, Tennant 1997.



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